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ABSTRACT

Because of the emphasis on special forms of writing, such as letters and reports, business communications classes do little to introduce students to practical, career-oriented writing situations. Management administration offers an excellent vehicle for the development of an advanced course in rhetoric combined with a survey of the administrative functions of management. Problems that help form the framework for introducing rhetorical principles include public relations, marketing, purchasing, and finance. Basic to the course would be certain key concepts about the role of individuals in organizations, the principles of upward-downward and lateral communication, interpersonal relationships and how to cultivate and promote them, and the nature of writing in organizations. Essential principles to present to an all-purpose course for potential business administrators include the following: (1) business writing and speaking are essentially referential--persuasive first, informative second; (2) writing for the business administrator is transactional in nature--a contract between writer and reader; (3) forms inhibit the creative, exploratory nature of the composing process; (4) students must move from the product-oriented paradigm of composing to a process-oriented paradigm; and (5) students need to adjust to the role of business administrator by role playing or by capitalizing upon their actual roles in present employment. (HOD)

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RHETORIC AND THE BUSINESS ADMINISTRATOR: WRITING IN THE PROFESSIONS

Patricia Y. Murray

Developing a new course is both trying and exciting, particularly so if orientation of the course is outside one's field. What could my field--rhetoric--contribute to a new course for business administrators? What follows here is an account of how rhetoric, which I take literally as well as theoretically to be the adjusting of ideas to people and people to ideas, can and should shape a course in written and spoken communication outside traditional courses in English. I hope to account for the frustrating gaps that can occur between the planning and the realization of a course as well as to delineate some presuppositions about fitting the world of the student to the world of the course. This tailoring process parallels what Dorothy Augustine says a writer does when "he . . . fixes a frame for his intention about the meaning of X so that it may adjust to the addressee's 'response',"[1] a response based upon what he, the addresser, knows about his subject and his intended audience. This in turn describes what rhetoric has to do with course or curriculum development as well as with the act of communicating.

I believe the principles I describe here are equally applicable in devising and teaching other courses in writing. We teach--that is, we get students to practice and to explore--the underlying principles, the "deep structure," if you will, of a still loosely defined action called composing.

Rhetoric and the Business Administrator

What training in written and spoken communication is commonly available to the student who intends to move into management after a formal academic program? English 101 and 102 or similarly numbered courses strive to develop basic writing and research skills to enable students to perform college level academic work. Business Communications, Writing for the World of Work, Technical Writing, Science Writing and similarly titled courses introduce students with special interests to communication requirements in business, industry, and technology. But because of its emphasis on special forms such as letters and reports, Business Communications often does little to introduce students to practical, career-oriented writing situations. And none of these courses is significantly concerned with the rhetorical processes internal to an organization in which a student may seek or hold a job, processes which frequently determine how such an organization functions on a day-to-day basis.

In order to understand the rhetorical processes of an organization, I have looked to the field of management, a field which has application to all organized activity. Management can be defined as an activity which performs certain functions in order to acquire, allocate, and utilize both physical resources and human effort to meet and accomplish a goal. The typical management functions are planning, organizing, controlling, and administering. While all management functions require extensive

communication, the functions of planning, organizing, and controlling place heavy reliance upon abstract forms of communication. Accounting ledgers, budgets, computer programs, engineering designs or mathematical models are examples.

Management administrative functions rely more upon written and spoken communication; systems and procedures, job descriptions, purchasing specifications and public relations are examples. Since such communication is highly structured, the empahsis in instruction should be on style, tone, awareness of audience, and purpose --not on form. Management administration offers an excellent vehicle for the development of an advanced course in rhetoric combined with a survey of the administering functions of management with which our graduates are apt to be concerned.

Course Development: Writing in the Professions

In developing a course called "Writing in the Professions,"[2] a course intended to cut across several professions and serve a diverse clientele, my first task was to select and study those functions of management that deal with the communications needs of an organization. The second was to find practical ways to relate those functions to rhetorical principles. Short of "hands-on" practical experience in business administration--actually working in a company gaining experience in the kinds of writing and speaking tasks organizations require--I investigated the problem by reading textbooks in the field, talking with management personnel in a number of areas, and gathering samples of writing actually produced in organizations such as medical centers,

heavy machinery companies, computer software producers, and so on. I found abundant study material, so my principal concern soon became the selection, development, and arrangement of that material in preparation for teaching Writing in the Professions.

Specifically, the areas I investigated were in public relations, marketing, purchasing, finance, and personnel administration on the grounds that a person in a middle-management role within an organization is, to greater or lesser extent, involved in each of these areas of concern. As my course took shape in the planning stages, specific "problems" that became the framework for introducing rhetorical principles evolved: a public relations problem, a marketing problem, a purchasing problem, a finance problem.

To illustrate:

A management activity is personnel. A subordinate activity, one that can be handled effectively in the classroom, is establishing staffing policy and procedure. Students in Writing in the Professions could study the communication principles involved (purpose, voice, message, audience) and write a job description and personnel procedure that would be representative of, say, a large medical center or a complex organization such as General Motors. Actual job descriptions and statements of personnel policy (hiring, firing, fringe benefits, vacations, etc.) could be brought into the classroom both by the instructor and by students who have access to them for our primary source of information--our textbook, so to speak. For the management activity

purchasing, subordinate activity buying, we could write bid specifications for a product to be purchased in selected companies, usually those in which students were actually employed. For the management function public relations, subordinate activity consumer affairs, we could write a report and press release explaining a defective product or service. To make these writing activities as realistic as possible, we would try to work with materials pertinent to local or state organizations based in our region.

Basic to the course would be certain key concepts about the role of individuals in organizations, about principles of upward-downward-lateral communication, about interpersonal relationships and how to cultivate and promote them, and about the nature of writing in organizations.

Actually, these concepts fit nicely with comparable ones from rhetoric (and maybe they are the same after all). For example, we recognize that a rhetorical act involves a discourser (writer or speaker), an audience (reader or listener), a context or "scene" in which communication takes place, a purpose, and a code, as well as the meaning of the message itself. In a business organization, the writers must think of themselves in management roles: foremen, personnel directors, purchasing managers, head surgical nurses. This is a difficult concept both to teach and to learn. The writer writes according to a role, not as "I." Similarly, the writer must think of readers as roles, so the audience becomes a supervisor, president of the company, or a government agency hearing an argument for legislation. Of course people occupy those roles;

but the orientation toward viewing both writer and audience in terms of roles is a crucial one.

The context of the communicative act may depend heavily upon the exigencies of a situation or whether a company suffers from "crisis management" approaches on a daily, weekly, or quarterly basis. It may depend upon the degree of hostility between persons or departments over rank, salary differences, and perquisites. Or the context may have much to do with time and available resources to meet the demands of a government contract, with securing cooperation from sub-contractors, or upon the company's ability to perform.

Purpose becomes, for the writer in a management function, largely a matter of securing action. The purpose of writing is to effect some action, to persuade another to adopt a point of view or plan of action, to secure "uptake" in the sense of recognizing the writer's intention and then reacting to it, to effect purposeful change--or all of these and more. The code or language, whether spoken or written, depends both upon the speaker/writer's ability to interact with others in order to do the job and upon the choice of language most appropriate to getting the job done. Familiar problems in communication surface here. Knowing the audience and having the skill to address audiences (the plural is significant) are two obvious ones. But the speaker or writer must develop an awareness of and sensitivity to what language can <u>do</u> as well. For example, "legaleze" can confuse, mislead, obscure at the surface level. "Computereze" can confuse,

mislead, upset, alienate a reader who does not share the jargon, is not as technically oriented as the writer, is not at the same level of administration as the writer, feels less well-educated or knowledgeable, and so on. Finally, physical "presence" and body language must be understood as important factors in analyzing and perfecting spoken communication.

So. The course called writing in the Professions began to take shape. I would simply find those tasks of communication my research said middle-management people would need to perform; then I would demonstrate how rhetorical schemes and principles of good writing or speaking match those tasks. Simple? Not so.

First, a splendid course might be, and probably has been, constructed along the lines I had planned; but, I soon discovered, my plan would work only for a largely homogeneous student group. Prospective business administrators, technical writers, science writers, journalists, lawyers--each makes up ideal student groups for whom designing and teaching a writing course would be a reasonably easy task. However, these homogeneous groups--students with similar career objectives, similar professional training, similar interests so far as occupations go, similar academic backgrounds--did not show up in my Writing in the Professions classes.

Who did? Two ladies who believed I would teach them to become instant stars and get their clever articles published in Readers Digest; a sweet young thing who needed to know how to write reports for a church group; a talented middle-aged woman

who had once run a small town newspaper nearly single-handedly but who had had no training in journalism; a man who lobbies for Native Americans; a court reporter who wants to study law; a woman who works as legal aide helping poor people with divorce actions; a young man who distributes a chemical spray device for self-defense; assorted other undergraduates (only one a business major); a head nurse on a surgical ward; and a middle-management General Motors employee, Korean born, whose not-too-long-range plans are to become General Manager of that corporation. There were others--all working toward BA degrees, some employed, some not, with wildly varying backgrounds, ages ranging from 25 to 55. Each wanted something a little different from the course. Each needed something different from the course. Each came into the class with a respectable level of writing and speaking skills--no remedial problems there. But, as in any other writing class, each student needed to improve communication skills in areas different from other students. In short, what I got was a student population that either had not read the course description or that thought any writing course would cure all communication ills and prepare them especially for individual careers.

Now the problem was to adjust the course to the students in such a way as to give them the basic writing practice they needed and to address some of the aspects of writing for the world of work. What needed to be done? Some of my original plans were salvaged, but many had to be drastically changed.

The first significant problem to overcome was teaching

students to determine who the writer is and what the writer's role is in an organization. Most students had not thought of themselves as roles. Thus the problem was depersonalizing most of what they wrote, getting away from expressive writing and focusing instead on audience uptake, on purpose, and on effective formatting of spoken and written messages. One way of getting at this problem was to work with egocentric organization charts which specify the audiences for one writer and one specific document. Students began to see themselves in terms of roles, not names. Egocentric organization charts not only force an analysis of roles and characteristics and tasks (job descriptions, actually), but also bring out the diversity of audiences and their lack of homogeneity. An exchange of job descriptions done orally in class, a "getting to know you" approach suggested by one of the students, turned out to be the best activity we could have done early in the course because our class is a workshop in which writers read, criticize, and react to each others' work. Knowing the other students' occupations and interests and backgrounds helped to establish high morale, reassure individuals that their skills were already high, and create the open atmosphere so vital to a writing workshop.

The second major task was to determine what members of the class <u>do</u> write or present orally on present jobs, what <u>reactions</u> they get to their writing, who writes <u>to them</u> and what reactions are elicited, and to decide as much as possible what specific

problems in communication exist in their immediate work situations. Writing job descriptions as a vehicle for getting at this analysis was an eye-opener for many in the class, for it helped them discover the differences between jobs as officially described or advertised and the real jobs they performed. (Not a few decided they were being overworked and under-appreciated!) It also reinforced the concept of the writer writing in a role within a complex organization.

A related task is that of determining what kinds of written and spoken communication each student needed to produce for a future profession. Many Writing in the Professions students were in the process of change, retooling for a new career or preparing for a different direction in a present one. We got at this problem by, again, examining and writing job descriptions, and by interviewing people in a student's future field.

Because of the diversity in backgrounds these students brought to the class, we had to learn and practice some key principles of writing that apply generally, for any kind of writing, as well as specifically for writing in a business organization: a law firm, the automobile industry, social services agencies, government, private business, education, and the like. Further, because the group was hetereogeneous, and because forms such as letters, contracts, proposals, and memos are different from organization to organization, we had to concentrate on effective writing rather than on forms. However, we did take a good, hard look at document design for ideas about effective organization; the impact of visual aids; the

psychological effect of white space, typeface, page placement, and so on, on the reader; and readability at the sentence level.

Essential to effective writing in business organizations as elsewhere is an understanding of audience, the role audience plays in determining or shaping the language a writer chooses, the voice s/he projects, the attitudes conveyed by voice and language, and the design of the written document or the oral presentation. We used these ways to implement the study of audiences, related to voice and language: the journal, business letters and memos aimed at target audiences, report writing, and analysis of promotional materials.

Journal writing is, not surprisingly, extremely difficult for many students who have been away from regular undergraduate work for some time. But the journal provides them a place for experimenting with editorials, pleadings, manifestoes, musings, analytical reports of articles from professional journals, and so on. In business letter and memo writing, we specified and varied the audiences: limited audiences, knowledgeable of the subject; anonymous audiences for documents to be kept in the files for 10 years or more; limited audiences, ignorant of the subject; and upward-downward-lateral audiences. One exercise that promotes a real-life feeling for the collaborative writing that goes on in business is group-writing a savings bond drive promotional document or an argument for installing supermarket banking in neighborhood stores. Report writing provides discipline by insisting strictly on directness, succinctness, and thinking through a problem.

Here we use Larson's problem-solving heuristic and Young, Becker, and Pike's tagmemic grid as means of thinking through a writing problem or task. A specific assignment for analyzing promotional materials is to study and report on a corporation's annual financial statement to its stockholders. A brief oral discussion as a warm-up exercise helps students to prepare for a later formal oral presentation and gives them an opportunity to explore the possibilities in the subject. "I picked out this brochure on reading stock market reports (Merrill-Lynch) because its blue color caught my eye. I don't know why. I'm not especially interested in the subject, but I learned a lot from reading it," confessed one student. Asking why the blue caught her eye and what effect it had on her led to a discussion of the psychological impact of color, what blue symbolizes, how blue makes one feel, and so on. Her terms were "Blue makes me feel secure and warm," which in turn led to her realization of the purpose of the document's originators.

In all these endeavors we emphasized writing to the educated intelligent reader, a concept that unifies the various disciplines and a concept that gives writers not yet writing for a homogeneous, specified audience an audience for which to write--and an audience that includes themselves and others in the class.

This leads me to the workshop format of the course I have already mentioned. This format allows for several important things: my introductory talks (not lectures); demonstrations of a principle

such as paragraph organization, features of sentence style, or parts of a business report; and peer criticism. The class makeup includes people with different perspectives on writing and on work. However, they are all motivated (motivation is not a problem--they've all perceived the relationship between the ability to communicate effectively and job success first hand; all recognize the value of learning to read, speak, and write well; all know they have shortcomings and desire to "fix them"); all are willing, even eager, to provide feedback to each other (many have studied the dynamics of group processes, worked with community groups, or organized and led political campaigns). A companion course called Business Communication works less well as a workshop precisely because the group is homogeneous, less experienced, less open to direct criticism from peers whose opinions about the quality of writing are less highly regarded than those of the teacher.

Related to peer criticism is the notion of developing the ability to "code switch." Just as speakers find it necessary to switch from informal to formal codes or from non-standard to standard codes, so do writers find it necessary to gear up their writing to suit a variety of contexts for writing and audiences. Jargon, shop talk, and the various "-ezes" may or may not have a place in a given communication. Students need to know when they do, why they do, and where they do--or do not. Peer criticism in a workshop setting gives students opportunities to learn how and when to switch codes.

The workshop approach also emphasizes the sound principle that writing is a process. We consider the written product that which grows out of work-in-progress, and it is work-in-progress that we concentrate upon in our class workshop sessions. Successive drafts that capitalize on pre-writing, writing, and revision activities serve the student writer better than textbook exercises which give an explanation or introduce a form and then direct students to "write a letter to your supervisor asking for a pay raise" or "send bid specifications to sub-contractors for plastic 5" toggle bolts to be delivered by sun-up." Rather, we devise a problem (the need for plastic toggle bolts or the need for more salary because there is another mouth to feed), plan an appropriate avenue of approach for solving the problem (and that avenue may not include writing), apply a variety of inventional strategies for generating solutions, write and rewrite, talk and re-talk, draft and re-draft the decided-upon product. The collaborative nature of a workshop helps writers see strategies more rapidly, I believe, than they would in isolated situations.

Sometimes this process leads to documents written by several writers, simulating the joint or committee writing tasks commonly found in complex business organizations. Sometimes the process leads to separate efforts; but the dynamics of the workshop approach help to alleviate the problems of writer's block, of having nothing to say about the subject, or of going off on tangents and missing the point. Incidentally, members of the class have been able to supply real problems that are shared by the class as

members of a community. In the case of assignments that I devise for them, they are free to alter them to suit their own work, and they do so freely. Evaluating for that grade-that-has-to-be-there remains a problem; in order to cope, I try to consider each piece of written or spoken "product" in light of the writer, the writer's needs, and evidence of the writer's effort to improve (given minimal guidelines) as well as the effectiveness of the essay, report, job description, or whatever. I also use an evaluation chart similar to those used in some writing courses in the College of Engineering's Department of Humanities, University of Michigan-Ann Arbor, which fellow students fill out.[3] But best of all, whenever possible, outside evaluators are asked to judge the effectiveness of a report or proposal. Outside evaluation works exceptionally well for the first assignment, a job application cover letter and resume; for the analysis of a corporation's annual financial statement to stockholders; for oral presentations; and for the final project, an in-depth investigative/persuasive report on a subject of considerable significance to the writer. If the content of such a report is highly technical or outside a body of knowledge I can deal with adequately, I believe it essential that someone else judge the accuracy of the technology involved or the probabilities of the writer's recommendation or proposal. Outside evaluation lends credibility both to me and to the course.

A major concern is that of style and readability. We follow the principles of sentence and paragraph rhetoric illustrated by

Francis Christensen and W. Ross Winterowd.[4] We look at the ways in which paragraphs cohere semantically. We consider the topic sentence, paragraph development methods, making a point and raising issues as ways of developing paragraphs. Some sentence combining has proved effective. Much revision has proven even more effective: moving from nominal to verbal style, from passive to active voice to produce jargon-free prose; defining terms and organizing ideas. We work with sentences that split agent and action, with sentences that fold back upon themselves, with sentences that ramble without focusing on topics or developing ideas about topics.

Summary

To summarize, I would say that the essential things to present to an all-purpose course for potential business administrators are these:

First, business writing and speaking are essentially referential, persuasive first, informative second. Although discussion and explanation build arguments, the act of informing alone presents problems in a complex organization, for misunderstanding may ensue.

Second, writing for the business administrator is transactional in nature--a contract, if you will, between writer and reader. But this contract need not be dull and lifeless or faceless. It can be enlivened with wit and intelligence and style, what I prefer to call pzazz.

Third, forms inhibit the creative, exploratory nature of the composing process. Better to leave forms to on-the-job training.

Fourth, students must move from the product-oriented paradigm of composing to a process-oriented paradigm. In a product-oriented model, we discuss modes of discourse (narrative, descriptive, expository, persuasive). We go from word to sentence to paragraph development as they apply to arrangement and style. We are concerned with correctness, with editing accuracy; with organization of parts as they relate to wholes: thesis, support, refutation, conclusion. But in the process-oriented paradigm we are concerned with moving from process to product; with the aims of discourse; with modes of discourse as means to the aims; with the synthesis of invention, arrangement, and style to achieve effectiveness in communication.

Fifth, students need to adjust to the role of business administrator--no matter how limited--by running through the simulations of role-playing or by capitalizing upon their actual roles in present employment. While not all students who take a course like Writing in the Professions will go into business or a profession such as law or dentistry, each is inescapably part of a larger social, political, and economic complex. Understanding how to become effective communicators within those complex organizations is rationale enough for "Writing in the Professions."

NOTES

[1]Dorothy Augustine, "Geometries and Words: Linguistics and Philosophy: A Model of the Composing Process," College English, 43 (1981), 230.

[2]Research to develop and implement this course was made possible by a grant from the Research and Faculty Development Fund, The University of Michigan-Flint.

[3]I am indebted to Professors Dwight Stevenson, J. C. Mathes, and their staff on the Teaching Technical and Professional Communication summer workshop, 1980, University of Michigan-Ann Arbor, for many of the ideas and some specific assignments I have adapted for my own course.

[4]A good source for ideas about style and form is Contemporary Rhetoric: A Conceptual Background with Readings, ed. W. Ross Winterowd (New York: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, Inc., 1975).